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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: COCHABAMBA: FIGHTING ERUPTS, TURNS DEADLY

REF: A. LA PAZ 83
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 75
[1](#)C. LA PAZ 54

Summary

[1](#)1. (U) On January 11 at 4:15 local time, violent confrontations between pro-GOB (mostly cocaleros) and anti-GOB forces in Cochabamba, Bolivia's third largest city, resulted in at least one death and over one hundred injured. This followed earlier skirmishes. The city had been paralyzed all day by a general strike; all public and private services were closed, and the city remained cut-off by road blockades erected by MAS militants on January 8. Negotiations between the GOB and Prefect Reyes broke down on January 10, the GOB explained that a solution to the conflict was close, while Reyes maintained a hard line. Reyes claimed that Minister of Government Quintana did not offer any solution (reftel A). On the same day, pro-GOB militants (mostly cocaleros) verbally and physically assaulted a group of journalists who were marching in support of freedom of expression. On January 11, Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas and his counterparts from La Paz, Tarija, Beni and Pando met with Prefect Reyes in La Paz in a show of solidarity. End Summary

A City Under Siege

[1](#)2. (U) A general strike paralyzed Cochabamba all day January 11; all public and private services were closed and the city remained cut-off by road blockades erected by MAS militants on January 8. Air transport was the only reliable way in and out of Cochabamba.

Skirmishes lead to Confrontation

[1](#)3. (U) Police forces prevented large-scale conflicts

on January 10, but there were still several politically motivated assaults. Responding to pro-GOB militants' attacks who thwarted their planned January 10 peace rally (reftel B), civic committee supporters and members of the Youth Union for Democracy took up baseball bats, sticks, golf clubs and homemade shields and began marching to "take back the city" from the Masistas. The two groups were within one hundred yards of each other near the Cochabamba soccer stadium, but police managed to keep them apart. In the early evening, pro-GOB supporters beat up an individual by the name of Luis Fernandez Sanchez. His attackers claimed that he was carrying a knife and chain. Fernandez argued he was beaten because of his "camba" (eastern) accent. Also on January 10, Youth Union for Democracy members assaulted a taxi driver who yelled at them for blocking traffic.

14. (SBU) On January 11 at 4:15 PM local time, violent confrontations between pro-GOB (mostly cocaleros) and anti-GOB forces broke out in Cochabamba. As of midday January 11, police sources had told Emboffs that approximately 6,500 pro-GOB supporters and 1,500 anti-GOB activists (Cochabamba civic committee supporters and a members of the Youth Union for Democracy) were preparing to confront each other. The police estimated there were 300 people from Santa Cruz among the anti-GOB forces. Despite Prefect Reyes' calls to his supporters to act peacefully, sources tell Emboffs that some of his supporters assaulted two or three pro-GOB "campesinos" the morning of January 11 in the Plaza Cala Cala. By 4:00 PM January 11, sources were telling Emboffs that the number of anti-MAS forces had swelled to several thousand, and many were agitating to instigate a confrontation and take back the main square, which the MAS activists had taken January 8. At 4:15 PM confrontations between the pro- and anti-GOB groups erupted. Although preliminary reports are unclear how the confrontations started, most are stating that anti-GOB forces pushed through the pro-GOB (campesino and cocalero) lines. At 5:00 PM state-TV station ATB reported Nicomedes Gutierrez, a forty -year old cocalero, had died from a bullet wound. No information was immediately available regarding who shot Mr. Gutierrez. At 5:30 PM, news outlets reported that the injured numbered more than one-hundred from both sides. There were also reports of four other deaths. As of 6:00 PM, the media that the Army's seventh division, based in Cochabamba, had been called in to restore order. The situation seems to be quieting down.

Negotiations Break Down

15. (U) On January 10, negotiations between the GOB and Prefect Reyes broke down; the GOB explained that a solution to the conflict was close, while Reyes maintained a hard line. Minister of Government Juan Ramon Quintana met with pro-GOB protesters in the morning and with Manfred Reyes later in the day. Reyes was forced to leave his meeting with Minister Quintana because a group of cocaleros marched on their location. Quintana announced after the dissolution of his meeting with Reyes that a solution might be near. Quintana stated, "We have listened to the sides, their petitions, and their suggestions. We now ... have a map from which we can navigate the task of negotiating." Later Reyes contradicted Quintana's more upbeat assessment by stating that he would not resign his position or become "a traitor to Cochabambinos." Reyes claimed that Quintana did not offer any solution (reftel A).

Journalists Attacked Again

16. (SBU) Pro-GOB militants (mostly cocaleros) verbally and physically assaulted a group of journalists who were marching in support of freedom of expression on January 10. The journalists were also requesting that the GOB respect

their right to work and protect them from aggression. The cocaleros shouted invectives, calling the journalists liars, sell-outs and conspirators. In response, Carlos Arevalo, the leader of the Cochabamba press federation, announced that members would begin a hunger strike in support of democracy and freedom of expression.

Solidarity for Cochabamba

17. (U) Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas and his counterparts from La Paz, Tarija, Beni and Pando met with Prefect Reyes in La Paz on January 11 in a show of solidarity. Civic committees from the five departments also discussed a meeting on January 11 to demonstrate their support for Cochabamba prefect and civic committee. The Santa Cruz civic committee has called for a general strike on January 16 to show their support for Cochabamba.

Comment

18. (U) Embassy La Paz is monitoring this rapidly evolving situation closely. End Comment.
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